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# Celebrating Phindile Sithole-Spong

The latest 21 Icons portrait subject, 'HIVisionary' Phindile Sithole-Spong is rewriting our HIV narrative.



The inspiring 21 Icons project has revealed the subject of their latest portrait and short film of the third season, 26-year-old HIV activist and founder of [Rebranding HIV](#), Phindile Sithole-Spong.

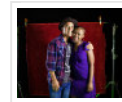
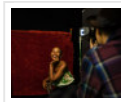
Phindile is a grinning, laughing, curvaceous, healthy and vital contradiction to all the clichés and misinformation about living with HIV that persist in South African and across the world, despite the fact that in excess of 35 million people are living with HIV globally.

Although she likely contracted the virus at birth, Phindile only received her diagnosis when, at 19, she was hospitalised with the symptoms and complications associated with advanced AIDS and a CD4 count of just two. It was a huge shock, naturally, but instead of letting it derail her, Phindile took charge of her life and health, became – in her own words – an 'HIVisionary' and launched the consultancy Rebranding HIV.

The company offers training, strategy development, public speaking services and even products like flavoured and textured condoms, in line with Phindile's contemporary, youth-focused approach to HIV awareness and management. 'For me, the best way to educate anyone about HIV – if you're living with HIV – is to just be yourself, because there's this misconception that HIV positive people are scary. But I'm still Phindi,' she says in the 21 Icons statement about the portrait.

No wonder then, that Phindile was named by *TIME* magazine as one of the 'Next Generation Leaders', and in 2015 was included in the *Mail & Guardian's* 200 Young South Africans list. 'Being HIV positive has been the best and worst experience of my life. It teaches you to be more present. It teaches you to be more understanding and open. If I didn't have HIV I'm not sure I would be as open,' she says.

That 'open-ness' is a central theme of her portrait – a close up of her smiling, radiant face. If living with HIV is to be rebranded, Phindile will be its thriving poster girl.



The 21 Icons programme is a film and photographic project that celebrates and commemorates South African leaders, our icons and icons-in-the-making, to 'showcase the pivotal moments of South Africa's nation-building journey'. 21 Icons is 'capturing human achievement through photography, film and narratives'. Their third season is titled 'The Future of a Nation', and highlights our youth leaders under the age of 35. You can connect with 21 Icons on Twitter, @21Icons, or with the hashtag #OurFuturesNow

**For more coverage, check out our stories on this season so far:**

- [Ashley Uys](#)
- [Michaela Mycroft](#)
- [Ludwick Marishane](#)
- [Thato Kgatlhanye](#)
- [Laduma Ngxokolo](#)
- [Catherine Constantinides](#)
- [Lucas Sithole](#)
- [Thulani Madondo](#)
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· Photographer [Gary van Wyk](#)

See [21icons.com](#) for more.

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